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Moderating the Magnanimous Man

Aquinas on Greatness of Soul

MARC D. GUERRA

In a still-influential book published sixty-three years ago, Harry Jaffa argued that St. Thomas Aquinas “mistakes Aristotle’s intention,” and for that reason Thomas endeavors to “save” the character of the *Nicomachean Ethics*’s magnanimous man “in accordance with what Thomas evidently considers a higher standard of perfection.”¹ The higher standard of perfection Jaffa has in mind is “Christian ethics,” as revealed in an epigram from Winston Churchill that Jaffa uses to open his book: “It is baffling to reflect that what men call honor does not correspond always to Christian ethics.” Jaffa’s argument is not simply that Aristotle’s account of the magnanimous man differs from Aquinas’s; it is that Aquinas failed to understand that his account of magnanimity was not identical to Aristotle’s. Against this view, a growing number of Catholic scholars have argued that Aquinas did not get Aristotle’s account of greatness of soul wrong. In fact, he adopted it while appending to it a distinctively Christian teaching on the demands of humility and charity. The argument advanced by these scholars “is not that Aristotle’s magnanimous man is a Christian but that his virtue . . . is compatible with Christianity.”²

1. Harry V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), 141.

2. Carson Holloway, “Christianity, Magnanimity, and Statesmanship,” *The Review of Politics* 61, no. 4 (Fall, 1999): 595.

While these two camps claim to be in fundamental opposition to each other, they are in reality closer to each other than either one cares to recognize. Both claim that Aquinas understood his teaching on the virtue of magnanimity to be identical to Aristotle's. And both claim that Aquinas's account of magnanimity is, to greater and lesser degrees, necessarily wedded to and framed by his teachings on humility and the infused, theological virtue of charity. However, in my view both of these positions miss the mark, although in different ways. Careful attention to Aristotle's account of magnanimity in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and to Aquinas's presentations of greatness of soul in his commentary on the *Ethics* and in his *Summa theologiae* reveals that neither is the case. Aquinas's teaching on magnanimity knowingly parts company with Book IV of the *Ethics*'s account of the magnanimous man in important and in substantive ways. Aquinas implicitly critiques the *Ethics*'s surface presentation of the magnanimous man even as he incorporates much of this account's teachings into his own views.³ Aquinas's view of magnanimity's role in political life is not predominantly shaped by his understanding of the roles that the virtues of Christian humility and the infused theological virtue of charity play in political life. Rather, it is most relevantly rooted in his recognition of the way in which justice, "the most excellent of all the moral virtues,"⁴ informs, ennobles, and transcends the realm of human affairs.

Aristotle's presentation of magnanimity (*megalopsychia*) in Book IV of the *Ethics* diverges in subtle but perceptible ways from the manner in which he has previously spoken of particular virtues in this work. Aristotle here does not speak of magnanimity primarily as a mean between two extremes, as he had done in Book III when giving accounts of the ethical virtues of courage and moderation. Rather, Book IV's discussion of magnanimity

3. Mary Keys makes a similar argument in her impressive *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Keys sees "Aquinas as offering a subtle yet far-reaching critique of Aristotelian magnanimity, one with roots in Aquinas's theology yet also comprising a philosophic reappraisal of Aristotle's account of human excellence." She notes that her account concurs "with Vaclav Havel (1991), among others, that reflection on the totalitarian experiences of the twentieth century reveals the humanity and nobility of a magnanimity informed by humility." See Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, 144. Although I am in broad agreement with Keys on this score, I think Aquinas's own teaching on the virtue of magnanimity is, as I will argue, more relevantly informed by his understanding of the created nature of nature and the natural demands of justice that are upheld by the created natural order than by his "theology" or by his teaching on "humility" or by his emphasis on "natural human sociability" (*Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, 154).

4. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 66, a. 4. All references to this work in this paper are to the following edition: Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981).

brings to light the form that this comparatively rare virtue actually takes in the great-souled man. The magnanimous man subsequently is described as he comes to sight in his own eyes, in the eyes of serious men (*spoudaios*), in the eyes of decidedly lesser men—and, in between the lines, in the eyes of Aristotle himself. As Aristide Tessitore artfully puts it, in “the same way one views a statue by walking around it, Aristotle invites readers to ponder the magnanimous person from several different and even conflicting points of view.”⁵ Aristotle deliberately invites his reader to contemplate magnanimity not in the abstract but incarnate, that is, in the person of the great-souled man. Presenting his reader with a portrait of the great-souled man, Aristotle gives an account of the magnanimous man’s great deeds and the great honors he rightly claims, and at the same time provides an insightful, if not unproblematic, glimpse into the inner psychic life that characterizes such a man. As we shall see, by choosing to proceed in this way Aristotle quietly draws attention to an irreducible tension that marks the life of the magnanimous man he describes. For on the one hand, the great-souled man “is incapable of living with a view to another—except a friend—since doing so is slavish”;⁶ on the other, he nevertheless seeks “great honor” from others and looks to perform the kind of “great deed” that necessarily requires others with whom one lives.⁷

From the time it is first mentioned in the *Ethics*’s opening catalogue of the virtues,⁸ Aristotle carefully distinguishes magnanimity from the more ordinary love of honor. Unlike its unnamed counterpart, magnanimity concerns the love of honor on a grand scale. As his name indicates, the magnanimous man is not simply animated by a love of honor (*philotimia*). He esteems the kind of great honor that is associated with and accompanies the performance of “great deeds.”⁹ Illustrative of this fact, he is not a man of constant, active civil engagement. He is both seen and said to be slow to act. Although his actions are few, they are “great and notable ones.”¹⁰ What is more, he knows that he is in fact worthy of great honors. To underscore the connection between his deeds and his greatness, Aristotle draws a comparison between greatness of soul and greatness of body. As men who are worthy of little and know that they cannot be great-souled, so too can “those who are small . . . be elegant and well-proportioned but not beautiful.”¹¹

5. Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle’s Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 28.

6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1124b31–1125a1.

7. *Ibid.*, 1124b25.

8. *Ibid.*, 1107b21–1108a1.

9. *Ibid.*, 1124b25.

10. *Ibid.*, 1124b26.

11. *Ibid.*, 1123b6–7.

Aristotle's comparison of greatness of soul and greatness of body points to a connection between the magnitude of a man's deeds and the magnanimity he possesses. At the same time, it also hints at a factor that would seem to qualify the self-sufficiency of the great-souled man. For the comparison leads one to wonder whether magnanimity depends on chance in the way that beauty is said to depend on chance. The small, after all, do not choose to be small; their body size is given to them. Could the traits that enable greatness of soul be like this? Could they be traits that men might be able to hone, like the small are capable of honing their graceful features, but whose very possession initially and ultimately depends on a gift from chance or nature or the gods?

Other problems associated with greatness of soul are indicated by Aristotle's claim that "in truth" it is difficult to be magnanimous, since "it is not possible without gentlemanliness (*kalokagathia*)."¹² A true account of greatness of soul must show that this virtue effects the humanly desirable but rare union of the beautiful or the noble (*to kalon*) and the good (*to agathon*). As Aristotle makes clear in his *Ethics* and *Politics*, the beautiful and the good traditionally are said to be united in a particular type of man, the *kalokagathos* or the gentleman. Viewed in this light, the *kalokagathos* is said to be the political man in the most proper sense of the term. In contrast to merely good men, who act virtuously for the sake of attaining such naturally good things as wealth and honor, the gentleman acts virtuously "for the sake of the noble, for this is the end of virtue."¹³ Truly political men, the men Aristotle calls gentlemen, are quite rare. Indeed, "the majority of those engaged in politics are not correctly called political men, for they are not truly political ... [but] embrace this sort of life for profit and gain."¹⁴ Aristotle, in not-so-subtle terms, thus emphasizes the difference between the kind of men who are "in truth" honorable and the kind of men who are commonly honored in public life. Aristotle's great-souled man thus comes to the fore as the most excellent man among political men, the great political actor or statesman *par excellence*. As such, he deserves the highest honors of men.

The great-souled man's concern with honors is qualified, however, in some decisive respects. He is neither unduly preoccupied with, nor overly pleased by, the reception of honors. Quite the contrary, he takes moderate pleasure in honors and even then only when they come from "serious human beings," since he recognizes that "there could be no honor worthy of complete virtue."¹⁵ As the last phrase indicates, greatness of soul "seems to

12. *Ibid.*, 1124a3-4.

14. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1216a23-27.

13. *Ibid.*, 115b12-13.

15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1124a8-9.

be like a kind of *cosmos* of the virtues.”¹⁶ The virtue of magnanimity seems to adorn the other virtues; it appears as the peak of moral virtue, a rare but recognizable form of excellence that the great-souled man wears on his head like a crown. Somewhat perplexingly, however, the reference to magnanimity being a *cosmos* also suggests that it is an ordered “whole” that comprehends all the virtues. Aristotle adds yet another piece to this puzzle by intimating that magnanimity by all accounts seems to include “what is great in each virtue.”¹⁷ The likening of greatness of soul to a *cosmos* thus calls attention to an ambiguity concerning that virtue’s treatment in the *Ethics*. While the question of whether it crowns or comprehends all of the other virtues remains unclear, Aristotle nevertheless suggests that the virtue of magnanimity is a complete or comprehensive virtue.

Greatness of soul is the first of three moral virtues, the other two being justice and prudence, that Aristotle suggests are comprehensive in character. Juxtaposing Aristotle’s accounts of the comprehensive virtues of magnanimity in Book IV and justice in Book V brings to light a tension that apparently plagues the life of the great-souled man. Like greatness of soul, justice also “is often held” to be “the greatest of the virtues.”¹⁸ Aristotle distinguishes between two senses of justice. In its comprehensive sense, the virtue of justice includes all of the moral virtues.¹⁹ It represents “not a part of virtue but the whole of virtue.”²⁰ Understood in this way, justice is associated with law-abidingness.²¹ But in its more narrow sense, justice designates a particular virtue. Justice understood in this way denotes a concern with the equal (*to ison*). It reflects a specific form that justice can, and to some extent does, take in regimes.

The initial equation of complete or comprehensive justice with the virtue of law-abidingness, however, proves to be problematic upon closer scrutiny. For Aristotle further draws a distinction between what is “just unqualifiedly (*to haplos dikaion*)” and what is just in “the political sense.”²² Political life necessarily cobbles together the natural and the conventional: “of the just in the political sense, one part is natural, the other, conventional.”²³ Governing free and equal men who share a common life together and who are capable of “ruling and being ruled” in turn, the type of justice one finds embodied in the laws of actual cities, ultimately falls short of the kind of justice that would inform “the best regime,” the regime “in accord with na-

16. *Ibid.*, 1124a1–2.

18. *Ibid.*, 1129b29.

20. *Ibid.*, 1130a8–10.

22. *Ibid.*, 1134a24–26.

17. *Ibid.*, 1123b30.

19. *Ibid.*, 1129b25–30.

21. *Ibid.*, 1129b19–25.

23. *Ibid.*, 1134b18–19.

ture."²⁴ Political justice, in other words, cannot perfectly achieve the lofty goals demanded by a strict adherence to justice. And yet it does allow for a way of life—and hence a place in nature, namely, the city—where men can (most perfectly) cultivate the excellences of their given nature. Both “in living together and in sharing in speeches and actions,”²⁵ political life points to a natural end that transcends the real but humanly limited good of “mere life,” that is, a life lived for self-preservation. Inasmuch as it provides the indispensable floorboards and some of the walling—but not the ceilings²⁶—of citizens’ and statesmen’s aspirations to excellence, political justice helps secure the grounds of political life’s humanizing pursuit of the just and the noble.²⁷

Whereas the justice operative in actual regimes seeks to rule the mutual relations between free and equal citizens, magnanimity points not to an established equality among citizens but rather to a great and important difference between them. It is the virtue of the man whose special form of greatness recognizably elevates him above his fellow citizens. Juxtaposing the “two virtues,” Ronna Burger perceptively observes, expresses “two independent principles—the just as a principle of equalization and the *kalon* as a principle of distinction—each of which, in its claim to represent the whole of ethical virtue, stands in potential conflict with the other.”²⁸ This is reflected in the *Politics*’s discussion of the problem raised by the presence of a man of outstanding virtue, whose very presence in the city raises the question of whether he should be allowed to rule or should be ostracized. Viewed together, Aristotle’s treatments of the comprehensive virtues of magnanimity and justice permit his reader to reflect upon the twin peaks of moral virtue from two related perspectives, namely, in terms of the most preeminent citizens within actual regimes and in terms of the way of life that binds all citizens and statesmen together in cities.

The complicated relation that the magnanimous man has with his fellow citizens is further analyzed in Aristotle’s treatment of magnanimity in the *Posterior Analytics*. In that work, Aristotle brings up magnanimity amidst a discussion of the use of equivocal terms. This virtue is used there to illustrate such an equivocation. Aristotle juxtaposes, on the one hand, Alcibiades, Achilles, and Ajax—real and poetically portrayed political men who

24. *Ibid.*, 1135a5.

25. *Ibid.*, 1126b11–12.

26. See Leo Strauss, “On Natural Law,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 140.

27. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b13.

28. Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 84.

performed great deeds on the battlefield and who were unwilling to succumb to political dishonor (to the point that their unwillingness to suffer dishonor finally pitted them against their fellow soldiers or citizens),²⁹ with Lysander and Socrates, on the other, two men who remained “unaffected by good and bad fortune.”³⁰ Of the five men mentioned here, Socrates alone failed to distinguish himself in political life. If Socrates is a model of magnanimity, he is not a particularly political model, at least as that term is generally understood and used in the *Ethics*’s account of greatness of soul.

Aristotle’s remarks in the *Posterior Analytics* raise the specter of a form of greatness of soul that is not explicitly political but instead unmistakably philosophic. Like its political counterpart, the possession of philosophic magnanimity would seem to engender an uneasy relationship between its possessor and his fellow citizens. Despite his claim to be a good—perhaps even the best of—citizens, Socrates’s fate resoundingly testifies to the conflict the citizens of democratic Athens believed they had with the philosopher. Yet it also seems that, to the extent that Socrates understood philosophic greatness of soul and the good it pursues to be informed by an order that transcends the horizons of the moral and political life, it enabled him not to call direct attention to the distance that separated him from his fellow citizens. Socrates, we should recall, was famous for his use of irony. Although the depreciation of one’s own abilities and worth can be a vice, the studied, ironic understatement of one’s true greatness, a practice Aristotle explicitly identifies with Socrates, can be a “refined” and effective way of avoiding the ire of others who take exception to one who appears pretentious.³¹

Aristotle brings Book IV’s treatment of magnanimity to a close by describing a series of traits that seem to characterize the magnanimous man as magnanimous man. What we could call “the surface presentation” of these traits casts many of them in a less than flattering light. Aristotle here does not go out of his way to soften this impression. Some of these traits appear to be amusing. The magnanimous man is said to speak in a deep, firm voice and possess a slow, deliberate gait. Other traits amplify the impression that the great-souled man consciously maintains a remarkably attenuated connection to those with whom he must live. He, for instance, remembers the favors he has done for others, but “not those that have been done” for him.³² Still other traits call into question the limits of viewing human beings and

29. See Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle’s Ethics*, 32–33.

30. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 97b25.

31. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127b25–26.

32. *Ibid.*, 1124b14–15.

the life of virtue simply within the moral/political horizon. Aristotle states that the magnanimous man is not prone to feel admiration³³ and that in his view "nothing is great."³⁴ On this score, Book IV's magnanimous man proves to be further unlike the Socrates spoken of in the *Posterior Analytics* whose capacity for admiration is connected to his ability, as Aristophanes and Plato note, to wonder about the things "aloft." As if to further emphasize this fact, Aristotle remarks that the great-souled man chooses to possess "beautiful and useless things more than useful and beneficial ones, for this is more the mark of a self-sufficient person" (*autarchia*).³⁵

The magnanimous man's belief in his own self-sufficiency, that is, his belief that he is a whole unto himself, moves him away from the demands of both justice and truth. While relating that the great-souled man fails to remember the good deeds that others have done for him, Aristotle invokes the Homeric images of Thetis and Zeus. Thetis did not remind Zeus, the king of the gods, of the favors she had done for him.³⁶ That would have displeased him, by bringing before him evidence of his need for others. The magnanimous man's belief in his Zeus-like self-sufficiency proves to be as untrue of him as it is of the Olympian god himself. It is tenable only as long as the great-souled man chooses to ignore the fact that he is dependent upon the city he inhabits and, by extension, upon his fellow citizens, for the very venue in which he can put his particular form of virtue on display. In this respect he *is* reminiscent of Aristophanes's Socrates, inasmuch as the magnanimous man too is depicted as being radically unappreciative of the social, moral, and political preconditions that allow for his particular way of life. Moreover, the magnanimous man's belief in his own self-sufficiency requires him to deny the role that chance seems to play in the exercise of magnanimity: for the exercise of greatness of soul necessarily requires one to live in a place and at a time when great deeds are both needed and can be performed. In short, as Robert Faulkner eloquently points out, Aristotle allows us to see how the "great-souled forget their dependence and, like Shakespeare's Caesar, incline to imagine themselves gods."³⁷

The account of magnanimity given in the *Ethics* thus cuts both ways. Insofar as it invites us to reflect upon the magnanimous man as he actually comes to sight in political life, the reader is able to catch a glimpse of the full array of qualities and tensions that typify such a man. This is one of the great strengths of Aristotle's presentation of magnanimity in Book IV of the *Ethics*.

33. *Ibid.*, 1125a2-3.

35. *Ibid.*, 1125a11-12.

37. Robert Faulkner, *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 42.

34. *Ibid.*, 1125a4.

36. See Homer, *Iliad*, I, 503-4.

Aristotle's complex portrayal of the great-souled man simultaneously elicits our admiration for this rare man's qualities and deeds, even as it lays bare, and forces us to recoil from, those bumptious and problematic characteristics that mark the lives of the magnanimous men one encounters in political life.

In his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas does not pass over in silence the less attractive features of Aristotle's portrait of the magnanimous man.³⁸ For the most part, he carefully explicates the surface argument of Aristotle's text. He does, however, conspicuously smooth out some of this character's more noticeable rough edges. That Aquinas consistently does so indicates that he is well aware of what he is doing in the commentary. The tactic that he takes in this work is in keeping with his acknowledged effort in the *Summa theologiae* to reflect upon the virtue of magnanimity not principally as it comes to sight in the person of the *Ethic's* great-souled man, but rather in a context that is not as studiously limited to the moral and intellectual confines that characterize the city and political life as such. His argument quietly but firmly has the overall effect of minimizing the opportunity for the political order to arrogate to itself the sole horizon or responsibility to determine the content of moral virtue. The thrust behind this approach is captured by Aquinas's remark in his commentary, which finds no exact parallel in the *Ethics*, that the magnanimous man's "whole attention is taken up with the goods of the community and God."³⁹

Aquinas's effort to widen the sphere in which magnanimity (*magnanimitas*) is viewed vividly comes to sight in his comments on Aristotle's claim that the magnanimous man thinks nothing great and is not prone to admiration. Whereas Aristotle had left it at saying that "nothing is great" to the magnanimous man, Aquinas remarks that "there is nothing great for him among the things that can happen *externally*, because his whole life is busy with internal goods, which are truly great."⁴⁰ This statement is in keeping with his general tendency in this commentary to affirm and maintain the great-souled man's capacity to discriminate between "external" and "internal" goods. For example, when Aristotle asks, "why would someone to whom nothing is great do anything shameful?"⁴¹ Aquinas remarks that the great-souled man "does not place so great a value on any external thing

38. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Notre Dame, Ind.: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), 171-82.

39. *Ibid.*, 779.

40. *Ibid.*, 777.

41. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1123b32.

(*rem exteriorem*) that he would wish to do a shameful action for it."⁴² Along similar lines, when Aristotle notes that the magnanimous man's deep and steady voice and deliberate and measured walk reflect the fact that one who thinks nothing great does not get excited, Aquinas states that the great-souled man "holds nothing external of value."⁴³ To be sure, the magnanimous man found in Book IV of the *Ethics* is genuinely concerned with what Aquinas here refers to as internal goods. The great-souled man is repeatedly said to be drawn to and actively to pursue virtue, the *kalon* and the good. But it cannot be overlooked that in the cases mentioned above, Aquinas consistently chooses to accentuate the great-souled man's active discrimination between external and internal goods in a way that Aristotle, for whatever reason, chooses not to accentuate in the corresponding passages in the *Ethics*.

Aristotle, as well as Plato's Socrates, affirms that philosophy begins in wonder.⁴⁴ Wonder is the spark that ignites a life that pursues an activity, the contemplation of *something greater than one's self*, namely, "the whole," that is ultimately done for its own sake. In contrast to his reference to Socrates in the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle in Book IV of the *Ethics* remains silent about the magnanimous man's interest in, or actual pursuit of, philosophic activities. His incapacity to wonder in fact would argue against it. In other words, the magnanimous man appears to be a model of a particular kind of human excellence, the kind of excellence that can and ought to be pursued in political life. He excels and shines in the realm of action, more specifically, in the realm of great action.

Aristotle's announcement at the opening of Book VII of the *Ethics* that he now makes a new beginning, however, signals that the question of virtue and human flourishing needs to be examined from a different perspective, other than that of the gentleman's, if it is to be treated adequately. In the sequel, the best judge of virtue and human flourishing turns out to be the "one who engages in philosophic inquiry about politics." Thus, somewhat unexpectedly, the political philosopher is announced as "the architect of the end with a view to which we speak of each thing as being bad or good in an unqualified sense."⁴⁵ It is the philosophic life—the life of Socrates, not the

42. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 747.

43. *Ibid.*, 782.

44. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b12; and Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d.

45. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1152b1–3. For an account of one way in which this new beginning or "another beginning" at the opening of Book VII reverberates back on Aristotle's previous arguments in Books I–VI see my "Aristotle on Pleasure and Political Philosophy: A Study in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 24:2 (Winter, 1997): 171–82.

life of Alcibiades or Ajax or Achilles or Lysander—that is seen to possess the greatest kind of greatness of soul. The account of virtue given in the preceding six books of the *Ethics*, Aristotle intimates at this point, must be returned to and each of its claims about the nature of virtue and happiness must now be reexamined in light of Aristotle's announced second sailing.

It is then rather remarkable that in his commentary on Book IV Aquinas indicates that the magnanimous man is prone to speculative reflection. Aquinas, as Mary Keys pointedly notes, in this case “endeavors” to paint “magnanimity in the context of a more unified, harmonious existence, indicating that greatness of soul conduces to both moral and intellectual excellence.”⁴⁶ Amid a discussion of pusillanimity, a vice opposed to magnanimity that inclines a man to resist engaging “in great things” rightly and “according to their dignity,”⁴⁷ Aquinas straightforwardly states that those who “are ignorant of their worth . . . suffer . . . damage to their goodness . . . they abandon works of virtue and the pursuit of speculative truths, as if they were unfitted for and unequal to things of this kind.”⁴⁸ Aquinas strongly implies that the great-souled man is not simply defined by the realm of political life, even the heights or peaks of that life's honorable pursuit of the just and the *kalon*. While undoubtedly presented only in passing, the image of greatness of soul hinted at here reflects a greater degree of wholeness or completion than the tension-ridden account of the magnanimous man that Aristotle gives in Book IV of the *Ethics*.

Aquinas's account of magnanimity in the *Summa theologiae* leaves little doubt that he sees something inadequate, and in important respects distorting, about viewing greatness of soul predominantly in terms of the political order.⁴⁹ It also leaves little doubt that he reads Aristotle's account of magnanimity in Book IV of the *Ethics* as doing just this. Addressing the disposition of humility (a virtue, it should be noted, not explicitly mentioned in the *Ethics*) to moderate exaggerated and misguided hopes, Aquinas states that the Philosopher “intended to treat of virtues as directed to civic life, where the subjection of one man to another is defined according to the ordinance of the law, and is consequently a matter of legal justice.”⁵⁰ Aquinas's own account of magnanimity in the *Summa theologiae* refuses to treat magnanimity principally in terms defined by the political order. Instead, it insists upon situating this virtue in a natural order of justice that informs political life

46. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, 151.

47. Aquinas, *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics*, 786.

48. *Ibid.*, 787.

49. Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 129.

50. *Ibid.*, q. 161, a. 1, ad 5.

even as it transcends the limits of political life. As Ernest Fortin notes, by so doing Aquinas settles the "issue between justice and magnanimity" unambiguously "in favor of justice" in a way that Aristotle in his *Ethics* does not.⁵¹

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas presents magnanimity as a part of courage or fortitude. Courage, one of the four cardinal virtues, helps perfect the irascible appetite.⁵² By putting reason into the irascible passions, it strengthens a man's resolve to persevere in the good in the face of hardship and the "dangers of death."⁵³ Building on this line of thought, Aquinas states that magnanimity moves a man to take up great deeds and great works in the presence of formidable obstacles and perils. Furthermore, employing the classic distinction between form and matter, Aquinas affirms that "the proper matter" of the virtue of magnanimity "is great honor, and that the magnanimous man tends to such things as are deserving of honor."⁵⁴ Here, Aquinas's enlargement of the realm in which the magnanimous man is seen and in which he is said to act starts to become clear. The magnanimous man is explicitly said to exist within, and to be properly related to, a created natural order that transcends the legitimate but limited order that nature upholds in the life of the city. Moreover, even this is connected with the divine. Aquinas notes that there "is in man something great which he possesses through the gift of God. . . . Accordingly magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God."⁵⁵ Viewed in this heightened light, the magnanimous man recognizes that his greatness is something given to him; it is something he possesses but for which he cannot take authorial credit.

Aquinas's magnanimous man thus understands his particular form of greatness to have its roots in a gift he has received from God. The magnanimous man recognizes this dependence as a matter of natural justice. This recognition is in keeping with the natural virtue of religion, "a moral virtue . . . [that] is a part of justice."⁵⁶ For it belongs to the dictate of natural reason, he argues, that man recognizes that it is God "to Whom we ought to be bound as to our unfailing principle; to Whom also our choice should be resolutely directed as to our last end."⁵⁷ The virtue of religion, he insists, "is not a theological virtue whose object is the last end, but a moral virtue which is properly about things referred to the end."⁵⁸ In sharp contrast

51. Ernest L. Fortin, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 169.

52. *ST* I-II, q. 61.

53. *ST* II-II, q. 129, a. 5.

54. *Ibid.*, a. 2.

55. *Ibid.*, a. 3, ad 4.

56. *Ibid.*, q. 81, a. 5, ad 3.

57. *Ibid.*, a. 1.

58. *Ibid.*, a. 5.

to the great-souled man of Book IV of the *Ethics*, Aquinas's magnanimous man acknowledges not only a cosmos above himself, but a cosmos that is ordered by and to a Being infinitely greater than the magnanimous man himself. That acknowledgment walks hand in hand with Aquinas's claim that the Old Law's moral precept to observe the Sabbath is itself part of the natural law "in so far as it commands man to give some time to the things of God."⁵⁹ It also walks hand in hand with his claim that the offering of sacrifices to God is also "of the natural law" inasmuch as this act reflects "natural reason[']s" recognition that man "is subject to a higher being."⁶⁰

Aquinas's magnanimous man, however, not only looks up in a way that the *Ethics*'s great-souled man has great difficulty doing, he also looks around him. He recognizes that he needs "human assistance ... to provide for his own life" in a way that the Aristotelian magnanimous man's exaggerated belief in his self-sufficiency prevents him from doing.⁶¹ This recognition is also demanded by justice; it is a demand of the special virtue of piety.⁶² The virtue of piety acknowledges that "man becomes a debtor to other men in various ways, according to their various excellences and the various benefits received by them."⁶³ After God, all men, including magnanimous men, are said to owe their greatest debts to their parents and their country—not simply for the contributions that one's parents and country make to the preservation of mere life, but more importantly for their contributions to the cultivation of the good life, since the city as city "seeks the highest among all human goods, for it aims at the common, which is better and more divine than the goods of one individual."⁶⁴

A full account of the ways in which the various demands of justice that Aquinas explicitly mentions in the *Summa theologiae*'s thematic account of magnanimity frame his understanding of that virtue would obviously have to take into consideration the complex roles that natural law, human law, and prudence play in his rich reflections on the nature and scope of the realm of human affairs. Such a consideration goes well beyond the bounds of this chapter.⁶⁵ But on the basis of what has been said here it should be

59. *ST I-II*, q. 100, a. 3, ad 3.

61. *Ibid.*, q. 129, a. 6, ad 1.

63. *Ibid.*, a. 1.

64. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Ernest L. Fortin and Peter D. O'Neill, quoted from *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joseph C. Macfarland and Joshua Parens (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), I, 1, 11.

65. For insightful discussions of the relation between natural law, human law, and prudence in Aquinas's thought see Fortin, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order*, 151–75; 209–15; and 265–86.

60. *ST II-II*, q. 85, a. 1.

62. *Ibid.*, q. 101, a. 3.

clear that Aquinas's treatment of magnanimity and the magnanimous man's relation to his fellow citizens remains in constant contact with his teaching on the natural law. By retaining this connection, Aquinas is able to find room in the city for the magnanimous. Put somewhat differently, Aquinas points to a way in which one can be a magnanimous man and still take part in the ennobling political good that all citizens, the ordinary and the great-souled, substantively share in common.